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Report to Acting Chairman, Director and Executive Committee, National Book Council.

1. I visited the National Book League's headquarters in London the other day, and was courteously received and shown round, and taken to lunch, by Martyn Goff, the Director. I would not say however that I have received more than correct treatment from the NBL; I was not invited to the Booker awards, it has not been suggested that I meet the Chairman (Margaret Drabble), and no further program has been suggested for me. This may reflect the fact that the NBL is very busy and gets many international approaches, or it may reflect the fact that I did not extend adequate hospitality to Goff on his visit to Melbourne shortly after I became Chairman; I was very busy and had excuses, but I feel guilty about it. Martyn mentioned that, having been asked to speak to our AGM, his speech was postponed several times as the Governing Council meeting proceeded upstairs.

2. The visit to Wandsworth was of very great interest and I was considerably impressed. The NBL occupies most of a large and airy building, originally built in 1888 as a town hall, occupying a corner site, an island site in fact, and purchased some three years ago for £250,000, with about another £150,000 spent on refurbishing. The site is interesting -- it backs on to an old Huguenot cemetery which, if the NBC could get rights for maintenance, would make a splendid grassy adjunct. The building is really a long way out of London and, worse, is not on a tube nor easily reached otherwise, and Goff admits that he would have been happier to have had the same facilities, if money had permitted, in say Bloomsbury. However, when I say 'a long way out of London' all I mean is that from central London it could take half an hour or more by public transport, a bit less by car.

3. The top floor (of four including basement) is not controlled by the NBL but by an institution called something like the Book Training Management Centre. Contrary to our impression in Australia, this in fact has nothing whatever to do with the NBL in a formal sense, being under a separate board, which runs a series of training courses for the industry, as well as providing a conference, seminar and convention centre. The NBL's interest in this is (a) it keeps the booksellers and publishers trooping through the NBL premises and seeing what is going on there (b) the NBL provides lunches, a bar etc. for the people at the training centre. This is not to say, of course, that the NBL does not make useful money from running its own special book-trade conferences from time to time -- see attached on the question of nook sale-points in libraries. The reason the NBL and the Training Centre upstairs are in the same building is largely because it was necessary for the Unwin Trust to buy or help buy the Wandsworth building that the building should be used at least in part for something of an educational nature.

4. Although the NBL building seemed an enormous place to me (its chief feature a very large upstairs room with large windows and double-glazing for conferences, exhibitions etc., in which they can seat 200 people), there are many complaints by the 20 people who work for the NBL of overcrowding and not enough space. For instance, I asked the Australian woman who runs the children's book library (all children's books published in the last two years -- the only such centre in England -- open to reseachers, teachers, pupils, parents, publishers etc. -- publishers donate books and pay to have them exhibited) why they don't keep bokks more than two years old and thus gradually build up a magnificent reference collection, and she said that there wasn't even storage space in the basement.

5. Functions of the NBL will be seen from the attached guide to the NBL. So far as I could see, in a brief visit and by asking questions, the most important functions are:

1. Director as a kind of important linkage in British literary and publishing life. Runs Booker prize and NBL makes about £3500 a year out of so doing (profit from the administration fee charged the company -- profit above the line, that is), for instance. Spends a lot of his time trouble-shooting, giving publishers ideas ~~xxx~~ and getting them from publishers etc., talking to groups, and no doubt servicing the demands of his council. Previous Deputy Director was unsatisfactory and now advertising for replacement; Goff says that he badly needs someone to oversee the practical, daily work of the NBL.

2. Children's book reference centre, described above.

3. Travelling exhibitions. Three staff. Acts on suggestions, if adopted (e.g. exhibition on computers, chess, bee-keeping) (a) gets expert to draw up list of books in print (b) gets publishers to donate books and pay small fee for inclusion in exhibition (c) prints guide to exhibition, packs in cases specially made for job (d) arranges itinerary -- one exhibition may got from school to school (a standard, averaged transport fee to all) and not be seen again in the NBL for nine months.

4. Publishing and bibliographical reference service (Mark Longman libzary) with associated information centre. Two staff. "I want a list of all books published on bridge-building in the last two years." Makes a charge if enquiries need detailed research.

5. Publications centre: leaflets on authors, reading lists on subjects, reports on annual design award etc. etc. (See lists in handbook attached.)

6. The NBL does not make a profit on its activities, though it tries to regain what it reasonably can from them. Its budget is:

Annual income £250,000.

Made up from:

Publishers (mainly, e.g. Longmans £9500) and others, above and beyond small formal membership fee	£100,000
Arts Council	82.500
Own activities, self-generated income	£30-£40,000

Ordinary members at £9 p.a.

abt. £20,000

Balance from big companies e.g. Shell, Time-Life, at £100 or £200 a year each.

7. The Booker Prize week is obvious the equivalent of our Australian Book Week, and a great deal of planning goes into it. This year Goff make very careful plans with the BBC for an extensive coverage of books and publishing, starting with a broadcast of the actual award dinner (the judges' decision was only made a few hours before, so the question of a leak did not come into it; a few days before Keneally's book was not ready in finished form, and Goff told Hodder's that it would be removed from the short list if finished copies were not on his desk on the Monday morning, i.e. some 24 hours before the dinner.)

The panel of judges is chosen by the management committee (which Goff picked in conjunction with the sponsors, and which he is a member of). Goff sits on the judges' panel but does not vote and is there for 'background', e.g. "It's no good someone saying they want to disregard the Keneally book because it's not fiction. It's too late. The moment you put it on the short list you agreed that it was." I was pleased to hear from Martyn that he is as concerned as I am that the award should be not just be one of critical or academic interest; for this reason he not only carefully selects the academic etc. judges, but places special emphasis each year on the selection of a judge who stands outside of literary fashion, e.g. a media personality known to be literate and interested in books who is sufficiently self-confident not to be steam-rollered by the writers, critics etc.

Although the great BBC coverage of books this last week was to me an object lesson in how this kind of thing should be done, and a tremendous spur to our starting well in advance and trying to persuade the ABC to do likewise in ABW, it did not go (England being England) without media criticism, e.g. would all these programs really make you want to go out and BUY the books they're talking about, too many whingeing authors, and so on. I attach the program pages for last week and I hope you will have time to look closely at them.

I have heard a report that the judges' report in Perth for our award was very offhand. Be that as it may, the judges' remarks for the Booker were very brief, at least as we heard them on TV. The costs of the Booker Award are: (90 novels read this year):

Award	£10,000
Chairman of judges	£1500
Other judges (five in all)	£1000
Paid to NBL for administration	£7500 (of which £3000 spent on above-line expenses)
Dinner: 130 guests at £26 each	(covered by sponsors)

I attach a history of the Booker Prize from the Sunday Times: please keep this for me. This is a very interesting document.

8. Some day we will of course be appointing new staff for the NBC, and it would be by very strong wish that the first thing such staff should be required to do is to spend say two months in London working with Goff and by turn in the various departments of the NBL, including the Director's office. Goff is very agreeable to this. He also says that

he has an invitation from the ABPA to come to Australia, that the British Council would pay his fare, that he would like an extra excuse, and that if in the light of the O'Neil report we wished his advice on NBC matters he would be pleased to make himself available.

9. I have been talking much to Alewyn Birch of Granada, who is chairman of a new Publishers' Association committee on the impact of future technology and economic developments on the book trade. He says two of the main problems emerging over the horizon are (a) the consolidation of more and more printing in the hands of fewer and fewer major firms, with the implications of a very few eventually being able to hold publishers to ransom (b) the fact that Sweden is now virtually the sole paper supplier to the British publishers, with the same implication. "Why on earth don't you Australians, and the New ZealandERS, move into this open market? We would warmly welcome you."

10. Stewart, my best wishes to you and all. At present we plan to return 14 December, though it is not impossible that we might stay an extra couple of weeks; in any case I'm unlikely to be on deck before about the end of January. My especial good wishes and thanks to Denis. Would you please have a copy of this letter xeroxed for each Exec. Committee member, and see that the enclosures are tabled?

With best wishes,

Stephen



I should have added above that there are also 1200 Life Members of the NBL, according to Martyn Goff a serious liability, as most of them paid small sums by today's values long ago, and now have to be kept serviced.